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A MARGIN'S MARCH TO THE MAINSTREAM- 'THE STORY OF MY SANSKRIT'

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ABSTRACT

In the context of dalit women narratives, testimony and autobiography involves discovering the words behind certain kinds of in articulations. Crucially still, it also entails finding alternate strategies for tracing the very contours or shapes of their silences.

This article examines the complex and various different ways in which writing by a subaltern woman may be read, both collectively and individually, as practices of bearing witness to forms of resisting silence and voicelessness. For the most part, the text taken up for study, "The Story of My Sanskrit", an excerpt from Antasphot (Outburst), may be viewed as telling tales of structured oppression, subjugation and everyday humiliations faced by a dalit girl in her academic pursuit and offer testimonies to what Lorna Goodison evocatively refers to in her poem 'Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move' as "the half that has never been told". As such, the reading of Kumud Pawde's narrative requires much more complex, attentive and more accountable exercises of listening and critical engagement than what had been offered by Western canons of literary analysis and interpretation.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Woman, Autobiography, Humiliation, Silence, Struggle, Sanskrit

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INTRODUTION

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."- with these powerful words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the basic premise of international human rights law was established instilling hope and happiness in the hearts of the millions who are deprived in the world (Johannes 329). Despite this, the ideological weight of hierarchical power and time honoured beliefs, the deviously created spaces of binary oppositions and the dynamics of superiority and inferiority seep into every sphere of human experience. Neutrality of space and nonpartisanship seems illusory and unattainable like a mirage. For millions around the globe, the fight against discrimination remains a daily struggle and the predicament of female subaltern is the most miserable of all oppressive classes. It is all the more disconcerting and agonizing if the subaltern is a woman.

A subaltern woman is even denied a subject position and is the one who occupies the lowest position in the social ladder. She finds her life, her hopes, aspirations and a basic right to a dignified survival, all foiled by multiple forces of oppression. It remains almost elusive and a distant dream for her to transcend the threatening power of suppression and oppression and lead a better life. What is more pathetic is that the dominant powers of the society have so naturalized this subjugation that a marginalized subaltern woman accepts her subjugated position to be something normal and considers it as her ordained destiny. This form of violence is institutionalized and perpetuated through hegemonic rule.

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Literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts that the "subaltern as females cannot be heard or read" because there is no space from which the female subaltern can speak(Spivak 10). Their voices and agencies are completely silenced and thwarted under the hegemonic pressures of political, social and cultural Hindu patriarchal codes of moral conduct and their distorted representations in British colonial narratives as victims of an uncivilized culture.

There have been constant endeavours by the feminist writers of literature to bring to light the common experiences and oppression shared by women all over the globe. However, in her seminal work "Imperialism and Sexual Difference" Spivak criticizes "some feminists for ignoring the specific experiences of 'Third World' women when they construct a universal feminist subject" (Morton 40). Thus, she exposes the hypocrisy of the system and knowledge that claim to establish the universality of the fact that all women irrespective of space and time, socio-culture and linguistic differences undergo the same set of humiliations, suffering, oppression and resistance simply because they belong to the category of women who is "the other". She strongly disagrees with the myth of 'global sisterhood' as it excludes the lives and sufferings of Third World women, particularly the marginalized women (Spivak 226). Spivak writes:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (287)

However, the increasing importance accorded to the silenced identities of the peripheries by writers and historians like Spivak has led to similar inquiries in the field of literature also. Dalit autobiography emerged in the literary landscape as a distinct category in the 1970s and within this paradigm dalit women writers started gaining a foothold on the literary scene in the 1980s through their articulation of "hidden histories of hurt and humiliation" (Anupama Rao 3). Dalit women writers through their literary representations have raised questions on the genealogy of Indian feminism where the position of caste has not been articulated and ignored. They drew attention to the difficult relationship between feminism and caste's complex history (Rao 3). Many of their writings foreground the vicious history of caste prejudices leading to discrimination, exclusion, and humiliation. The very titles of many Dalit women autobiographies relate the untold hidden stories of stigmatization, oppression, and poverty against which the dalit self, is insistently, and perhaps necessarily, articulated: Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* (Outburst, 1981), Shantabai Kamble's *Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*(The Kaleidoscopic Story Of My Life,1983), Baby Kamble's *Jine Amuche* (Prisons We Broke,1987), Urmila Pawar's *Aaidan* (The Weave Of My Life, 1988), Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku*(1992), Janabai Girhe *Maranakala* (Death Pains, 1992), Kaushalya Baisantry's *Dohra Abhshaap*(Twice Cursed,1999), Susheela Takbhaure's *Shikanje ka Dard*(The Pain of the Trap,2011)Gogu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* (2012).

For many of these dalit women writers, the act of writing autobiographies is not only a matter of speaking out against silencing and raising questions of representation and power, but it also involves the task of making space for the affective, emotive and political dimensions of what the Japanese Canadian poet and activist Joy Kogawa has aptly described as "a silence that cannot speak," or "a silence that will not speak". Rich rightly observes:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity. It is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness

of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us and how we can begin to see- and therefore live- afresh (167).

In the context of dalit women narratives, testimony and autobiography involves discovering the words behind certain kinds of inarticulations. Crucially still, it also entails finding alternate strategies for tracing the very contours or forms of their silences.

This article examines the complex and various different ways in which writing by a subaltern woman may be read, both collectively and individually, as practices of bearing witness to forms of resisting voicelessness. For the most part, the text taken up for study "The Story of My Sanskrit", an excerpt from *Antasphot* (Outburst), may be viewed as telling tales of structured oppression and everyday humiliations and offer testimonies to what Lorna Goodison evocatively refers to in her poem 'Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move' as "the half that has never been told"(4). As such, the reading of Kumud Pawde's narrative requires much more complex, attentive and more accountable exercises of listening and critical engagement than what had been offered by prevalent Western models of literary analysis and interpretation.

If Kumud Pawde's story "The Story of My Sanskrit" moves us as readers, it also alerts us as to the myriad forms of mobilization required against class oppression. The text is rooted in personal experiences and observations of Kumud Pawde. This not only involves the actual speaking of the story but also the ability to transform and intervene in real political situations and in the lives of the people within the text. The voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an "I", seeks to be recognized and acknowledged. It wants to stake a claim on our attention. The presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience, is the voice of the real rather than a fictional woman. It is the mark of the desire not to be silenced or defeated but an effort to move the great stone from the hole that sealed the history of the dalits with "blood wax" (Goodison 4).

Kumud Pawade writes of the double exploitation dalit women face due to their gender and their caste. *Antasphot* literally means "outburst". Her autobiography cannot be considered only as the outburst of emotions. It is the spontaneous outpouring of the ideas and thoughts of dalit women who have long been silenced. To deem women-centric dalit writings as simply emotional outbursts, in her opinion, is to take a patriarchal/male-centric view of women's narration of their lives as lived and experienced as dalit women.

Kumud Pawde's story is not just her story. Her struggle to get an education is every Dalit's struggle. Every low caste marginalized subject can identify with her story and establish immediate recognition with the orgy of ordeals that she had to undergo in the pursuit of academic [mis] adventure. What was unusual and daring about Kumud was her determination to tread the forbidden path- to study Sanskrit. Sanskrit, the 'sacred' language of the upper caste Hindu society was considered so sacrosanct that the lower castes weren't even allowed to listen to it being recited.

Her birth and upbringing into a Mahar low caste family does not in any way match with her inclination to study Sanskrit. She not only learns the Sanskrit language but also starts teaching the language as a professor in the famous college where she had studied. It is an aberration and a sheer challenge to the Brahmanic hegemony. All her woes spring from this source.

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A woman who represents such contradictions obviously becomes an object of abject criticism and attraction of a different kind- blended with "acceptance and rejection" because that "which for so many centuries was not to be touched by us, is now within our grasp. That which remained encased in a shell of difficulty, is now accessible" (Pawde 72).

In her academic journey, she encounters words hurled at her words which become weapons and come in the form of hot spears that do not physically harm her but prick holes in her mind and turn her "sensitive heart into a sieve." Words polished as marble, sugar-coated and "gleaming smooth as cream" try to crush her spirit:

"Well, isn't that amazing! So you are teaching Sanskrit at the Government College, are you? That's very gratifying I must say" (72). At the literal level, they may appear quite ordinary and straight- forward. But the undercurrent of hatred and sarcasm in the tone of the speaker pulls her in many different directions.

'That all human beings are one another's equals' is often taken to be our shared starting point- the first article of most of the constitutions of the world. It is the indignant riposte of the oppressed and subjugated; the cry of revolutionaries; the common basic premise of all contemporary political thoughts. This implies that each man is of equal value and worthy of equal concern. However, the direct scathing attack that Kumud receives strikes at her self-worth. Despite her respectable position in society and a good job as a professor she has to frequently listen to such comments as, "In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit even from you?" "All our sacred scriptures have been polluted". "It's all over! *Kaliyug* has dawned. After all, they are the government's favourite sons-in-law! We have to accept it all" (72).

All these comments have left a deep scar and are so firmly been implanted in her psyche that although she tries hard to forget her low caste, she finds it difficult to forget it. She remembers an expression that she heard somewhere, 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying- that is caste' (73).

However, it is not that she only receives looks and words of scorn from upper caste scoffers that come down heavily on her and leave her embittered. Her mutilated soul finds solace in the glances of her own caste fellows who look up to her with admiration and pride in the achievement of the most impossible. Again, every corner of her being fills with ecstasy when she sees 'innocent admiration, prompted by the boundless respect', in her students' eyes. She values their opinion as they are pure and far away from caste consciousness and 'prejudices of their elders'. But, even such admirers limit their feelings of wonder at her skills to their glances only; they could hardly reach their lips. Kumud yearns for words of admiration which, though, she occasionally receives from her students. "Madam, I wish your lesson would never end"(73).

At times she feels she is being praised for the wrong reasons. It 'starts to be blazoned even at the official level. As usual, they start beating the drum of my caste, and tunes of praise of my knowledge of Sanskrit begin to mingle with the drumbeat'(73). Again with ensuing hopelessness and helplessness, she confronts such public praise,

"Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and shudras, a woman from those very shudras, from the lowest caste among them, will today in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India" (74).

It cuts like a knife and smacks of supremacist dogmatism and moral destitution of the upper caste mindset. Her heart gets drowned with feelings of inferiority. Such patriarchal hypocrisy makes one thing clear- A country that was rapidly transforming in the wake of independence, India's multiculturalism and Hinduism's deep-rooted caste system have created a multitude of fissures that hint at the fact that the culmination of the 20th Century was more colonized, creating

binaries of 'us' and 'them'. She is humiliated for robbing them of their social position and for her encroachment into their sacrosanct cultural domain.

The hurt psyche takes her back on a journey to her troubled childhood to analyse her present state. She reminiscences that the present state of disgust is nothing unfamiliar to her. Only that she has grown more accustomed to it now. She compares herself with her classmates, mostly upper caste girls and found that she was no less clean and civilized than them. In fact, she says:

Every day, I bathed myself clean with Pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair and plaited it neatly. My clothes were well washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance.....The other girls in my class (except for those who lived near my ghetto) also liked to sit next to me.(75)

But, she fails to find the reason behind their mother's warnings, "Be careful! Don't touch her. Stay away from her. And don't play with her. Or I won't let you into the house again"(75). These discriminatory words directed towards her were intended to be understood by her. She suffers a lot. Her angst makes her feel that it was she 'who didn't like to sit next to those girls'. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn't bear the smell of shi kakai mixed with the smell of their hair. Their bad breath, too, was unbearable. And, in spite of all this, they found me disgusting?'(75-76). At such a tender age when she should be skipping around and playing, such words compel her to think and inspire her to be introspective.

A turning point in her life comes when she goes uninvited to a thread ceremony of her classmate's brother. Her childlike curiosity draws her to this place. She stands outside the pandal and marvels at the ceremony- the sacrificial fire, the fragrance of incense and reverberations of the Vedic mantras being chanted. She was enchanted and lost in watching this 'extremely new, unknown' event when suddenly she hears a woman all decked in gold and pearls screaming from behind, "Hey, girl! What are you staring at? Can you make head or tail of it?" And then words follow, "These mahars have really got themselves" (76). Outwardly the woman was richly dressed but inwardly she was morally destitute.

G.N. Devy, Indian literary critic and former Professor, investigates the outcome of Hindu myth and mythology on the lived life experiences of a dalit. He uses the example of Upanayana ceremony which is linked to the prospects of a metaphorical rebirth and is a privileged entitlement of the first three vernas. In one of the hymns of Rigveda, it is elaborately stated how this ceremony was denied to the shudras thus, taking away from them the possibility of a second birth, hinting at their destined rebirth only as shudras. Consequently, they were denied the study of the Vedas and were 'ritually exiled' (Mukherjee 19) evidently proving that the "colonisation of knowledge was a central tenet of the caste system" (Roy 96).

Kumud's innocent young mind grapples with innumerable questions. "Why was I so wrapped up in watching? What had that ceremony to do with me? And why should that woman behave so bitchily with me?" and then she realizes that there is definitely some connection between her and those Vedic mantras(76). Though unhappy, this incident bolstered her decision to learn Sanskrit.

Her determination to take up Sanskrit as an academic pursuit was beset with innumerable challenges. As the iconic Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar said, "Some closed the door. Others found it closed against them." It is indeed agonizing that the institution of caste, which is "one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that

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human society has known", has not been severely derided internationally the way institutions like racism and sexism have been (*Writings and Speeches* 22). Dalits, even to this day, remain prisoners of caste oppression and exploitation, although, untouchability as a practice was legally abolished in the year 1949 (Mukherjee xvii).

After independence from British rule, a new wave of hope of the establishment of an egalitarian society swept across India. People expected that the wave of change would liberate the untouchables and grant them a life of equality and dignity and this is evident in the reply of Kumud's father when she asks him if she can learn Sanskrit. Her father's reply, "Why shouldn't we? After all, we're independent now. Those days are gone. Learn Sanskrit" (Pawde 76-77).

That "caste is fundamentally religious" is false (Dirks 61). It got more cemented into places of politics and education system also, as those occupying the top of the social hierarchy found the arrangement to their advantage and resisted any attempts to reform it. When Kumud takes Sanskrit as an elective subject in class nine, all sorts of indirect efforts were systematically made to prevent her from learning Sanskrit. "You won't be able to manage. There will be no one at home to help you. Sanskrit is very difficult" (Pawde 77). But she was like a rock and fiercely chased her dream. Of course, in her academic journey, she was helped by such teachers like Gokhale Guru ji, a 'Brahmin incarnate' for whom she nourished the most profound respect. The good mark that she got in Sanskrit in Matriculation confirms the path that she has to traverse in future. And she makes up her mind to do an M.A. in Sanskrit. She finds herself greeted with taunts and words of discouragement coming from all sorts of people, be it people from her caste or from the upper caste. "Even these wretched outcasts are giving themselves airs these days- studying in colleges" (79). The ironic comments about the scholarship she got irked her immensely. She pretends to be deaf and silent but not inactive. She wants to answer them with her action. She experiences a shared misery when she thinks of the hardships that Savitribai Phule must have endured.

As she climbs the ladder of success she finds herself to be the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. This taste of achievement gives wings to her aspirations and now she wants to become a lecturer in Sanskrit. She was full of expectations. She started attending interviews with the hopes of receiving a high paid job but was confronted with such remarks, "So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit" (81). For two long years she remained unemployed. She realized that nothing comes to a dalit woman on a platter from the government. Her education has enabled her to think critically. By now, she has learnt to fight for her rights. In her frustration, she approached the noted Cabinet Minister and presented her case in writing. There she was directed to meet the Chief Minister of Maharashtra who made fulsome promises in his own style, "We'll definitely make efforts for you- but you won't get a job in minutes" (82). With words of assurance came a piece of advice, "You shouldn't run after a job. Involve yourself in research" (82). She was soon disillusioned and understood the hollowness of the promises of the government of New India. It was nothing but a travesty of democracy. The bounds of her endurance began to break and she retorts, "Saheb, if you can't give me a job, tell me so, clearly, I don't want promises....Research is the fruit of mental peace. How do you expect me to have mental, peace when I am starving?" (82).

The wait for the job seems endless. She accepted this with resignation but not with the defeatist attitude and so to occupy herself, she took up M.A. in English. In the meanwhile, she gets married. It was an inter-caste marriage. To the utter surprise of Kumud, she gets a job of an assistant lectureship in a government college within few months of her marriage to a man belonging to an upper caste. Such amazing remarks as, "How did this girl remain unemployed for two years?", is definitely not due to her excellent achievements. The 'credit for Kumud Somkuwar's job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde'- a status and a surname that she acquires after her marriage with her upper caste husband (83).

Kumud is now a professor of Sanskrit but she still feels sorry and deprived due to her caste status. Her trajectory is of a very different kind. Her modern education and salaried employment sets her apart from those of her ilk and takes her away from the physical tortures and hardships her ancestors had to endure. But, the point of similarity is their silence and traumatic experience which they had to undergo in altered situations.

Kumud speaks her silence. She resists her silence. In a way, she talks of the cultural and collective trauma that leaves an indelible mark upon the group consciousness. She wields her pen not to write a victim narrative to gain sympathy but to expose the elitist mindset still working under the garb of democratic social and political justice and fill the gaps with her hidden untold stories in her autobiography with poignancy. Her writing stirs and creates spaces for the readers to think critically and engage in debates to transform and intervene in the real politics of India that is far from an egalitarian mindset.

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